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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON 6, D. C.

The Merrill J. Gross
Collection



Edward Potthast

1857-1927

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Washington, D. C.

March 16 through April 22, 1973

Foreword

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART is proud to present for the first time in its entirety the Merrill J. Gross Collection of the work of Edward Henry Potthast.

The Collection comprises 79 works in oils, crayons and watercolors. These represent Potthast's best period, an almost overwhelming melody of sunshine, nostalgia and optimism. Potthast's painting technique combines the strong brushwork of Munich with the bright colors of impressionism. He is best known for his small, sun splashed beach scenes. He loved to re-create the play of light on sand and sea.

The Merrill J. Gross Collection is in some degree due to the Gross children, Geoffrey, Spencer, Pamela and Lawrence. About ten years ago the young children, for pragmatic reasons, were asked, "Which do you like better, the Indian paintings or the beach scenes?" The children voted unanimously for the beach scenes.

Acknowledgement must be made to Mr. Findsen for his essay and for the design of the catalogue. As usual the Gallery staff has contributed to the success of the exhibition and the Director wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Dorothy Phillips, Curator of Collections and Research, Frances Fralin, Assistant to the Director, and Martha Morris, Registrar.

The Corcoran Gallery wishes to acknowledge the donation from the Columbia Broadcasting System, Inc. which has been used in the publication of this catalogue.

Finally, thanks are due to the Gross family for the generous loan of the Potthast Collection. Mr. Gross has been most helpful in all the aspects of the exhibition, particularly in seeing the catalogue through the press, in guaranteeing insurance coverage and in caring for other logistic details. Mr. Gross has collected in the American field for over 35 years and feels that "this Collection conclusively proves that American artists have their own place in the sun."

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, founded in order to "encourage and promote the American genius" is pleased to join with Mr. Gross in presenting the work of Potthast. In doing so, the Corcoran furthers its policy of bringing recognition to the achievements of American artists during the present and past.

ROY SLADE
Director



61. Children at Shore #3, on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

Introduction

EDWARD H. POTTHAST, N.A., was always an excellent painter, whatever his subject or technique, but it is for his beach scenes that he is remembered both because they are extremely happy paintings and because they show Potthast as an American impressionist of the first order. He was a shy and retiring man who felt "blamed foolish" to read a review of his work. A respected painter in his day, he was largely forgotten by posterity until a series of exhibitions in the late 1960's, mostly of portions of the Merrill J. Gross collection, revealed one of the most pleasurable experiences in American painting, the brilliant beach scenes of Edward Potthast.

Edward Henry Potthast, son of a German cabinet maker, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 10, 1857. By the age of 13 he was enrolled in art school and at 16 he was working as an artist in a lithographic printing company. He worked as a lithographer in Cincinnati until he was 39 years old, except for six years of study in Europe. Then, in 1896, he moved to New York where he worked as a free lance magazine illustrator "for a number of years," in his words, "before devoting all of my time to painting."

Cincinnati was an important art center in the last century. Thomas Cole, Hiram Powers, and John James Audubon had worked there before Potthast's time and his contemporaries included Robert Henri, Henry Farny, John Henry Twachtman and Frank Duveneck. It was also a German city which expected its artists to be trained in Germany. Duveneck, in fact, became the leading artist of the "Munich School" of painting. That Potthast would study in Germany was almost inevitable for a Cincinnati artist of the day.

He studied in Munich, Antwerp, and eventually, Paris, gathering influences as he went along. The Munich School provided the bravura brush stroke and the somber palette of his early work. Studies in Paris introduced him to the impressionists and at least one painting (*Starry Night*, catalogue number 2) suggests that he might have been familiar



50. The Grand Canyon, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

with Whistler's controversial "Nocturne in Black and Gold."

His early paintings include Dutch interiors, Barbizon landscapes and Alpine mountain scenes. American scenes indicate that he traveled to Pennsylvania and to New England. There are two New England watercolors in this collection (numbers 14 and 17). In 1910 he was one of five artists, led by Thomas Moran, who were commissioned to paint the Grand Canyon and other Western scenes. He belonged to numerous art societies and won a great many awards and medals.

Before the beach scenes were painted the influences of impressionism on Potthast's work were only slight. He seems to have been waiting to find a subject which would require the use of the impressionist palette. The subject may have been provided by Winslow Homer.

There are a number of interesting parallels between the lives of Potthast and Homer, who was 21 years older than Potthast. Both were lifelong bachelors. Both began their careers as artists for printing firms, both left their home towns to free lance in New York and turned to painting as soon as they were financially able. Most significant is the fact that Homer's most prolific period as a magazine illustrator was when Potthast was an apprentice and that, during those years, one of Homer's most often repeated subjects was beach scenes. If Potthast's travels were in search of an American idiom for his European training, a chance visit to a beach may have triggered his early memories of Homer's woodcuts in Harper's Weekly Magazine, providing him with a subject which allowed him to modify impressionism to suit his needs.

Few of Potthast's paintings are dated but it is known that the beach scenes, and other subjects treated in a similar manner, were done in the last 20 or 25 years of his life. Previously he had used darker colors as if he could not rationalize the use of impressionist colors without a subject which obviously demanded them. And on the beaches,

he would be required to paint in a free and rapid manner, avoiding the finished look of studio painting.

It is easy to imagine him, dressed in a suit and hat and looking, as one reporter described him, more like a bank clerk than an artist. His studio was next to Central Park, and he would go each morning to Coney Island or other New York beaches with his paint box and a number of wood panels or canvas mounted to board. A photograph shows him painting, surrounded by children. He is smiling a contented smile.

The sun, sand, and sea demanded the bright colors. The bravura strokes blocked in the scenes with astonishing facility. Beach umbrellas, bouncing balls, children splashing in the surf and ladies sunning are modeled more in light than in paint with the sun always playing a leading role. Occasionally the subject might change to a picnic in Central Park or the medium might be crayon on waxed paper. Some sketches became larger paintings in the studio but, as his Chicago dealer, J. W. Young wrote, "I doubt whether he has ever felt that he has produced a finished picture."

Potthast died in his studio of a heart attack on March 9, 1927, at the age of 69. The New York newspapers dramatically reported that he had died at his easel, though he had just returned from a luncheon at the National Academy. He was surrounded by hundreds of his paintings which had just been returned from his last one-man show at Grand Central Galleries. They were soon shown again at his first retrospective exhibit at Traxel Gallery in Cincinnati. Then Potthast was forgotten for more than 30 years. It has been through the efforts of a few collectors, and particularly of Merrill J. Gross, that the beauty of Potthast has been brought once more into view.

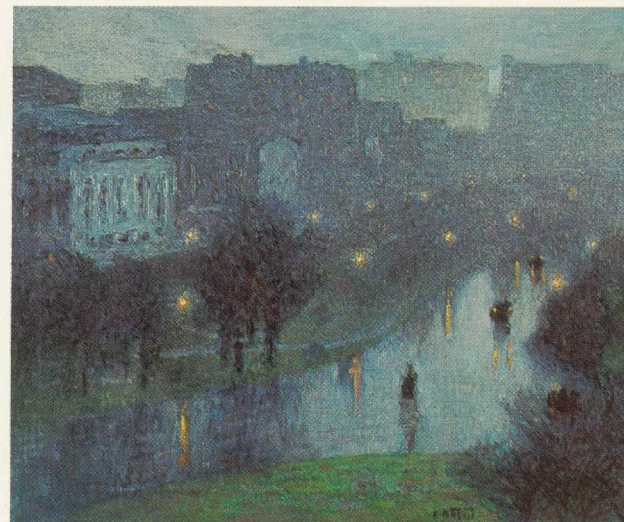
OWEN FINDSEN
Art Critic
Cincinnati Enquirer



32. Summer Breezes, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

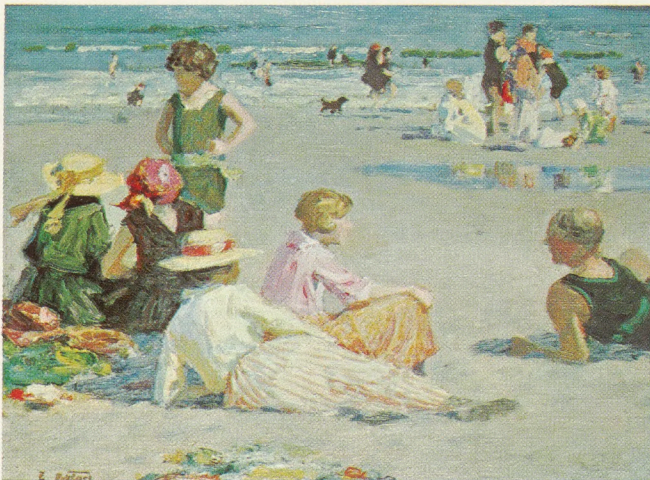


40. The Swimming Lesson, on board, 12 x 16 inches



45. Night Scene, New York City, on canvas,
20 x 24 inches

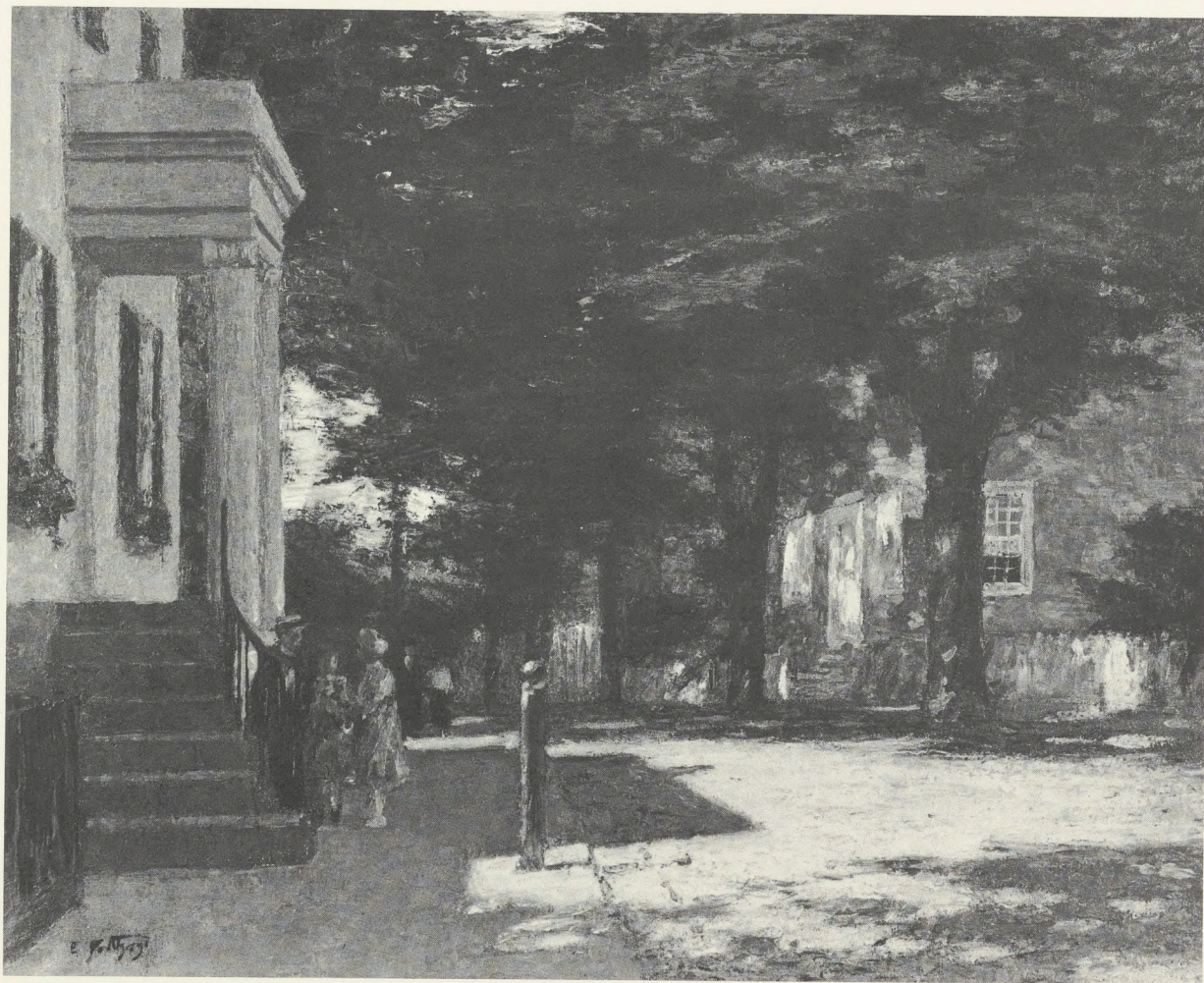
17. An Old Dock, watercolor, 22 x 30 inches



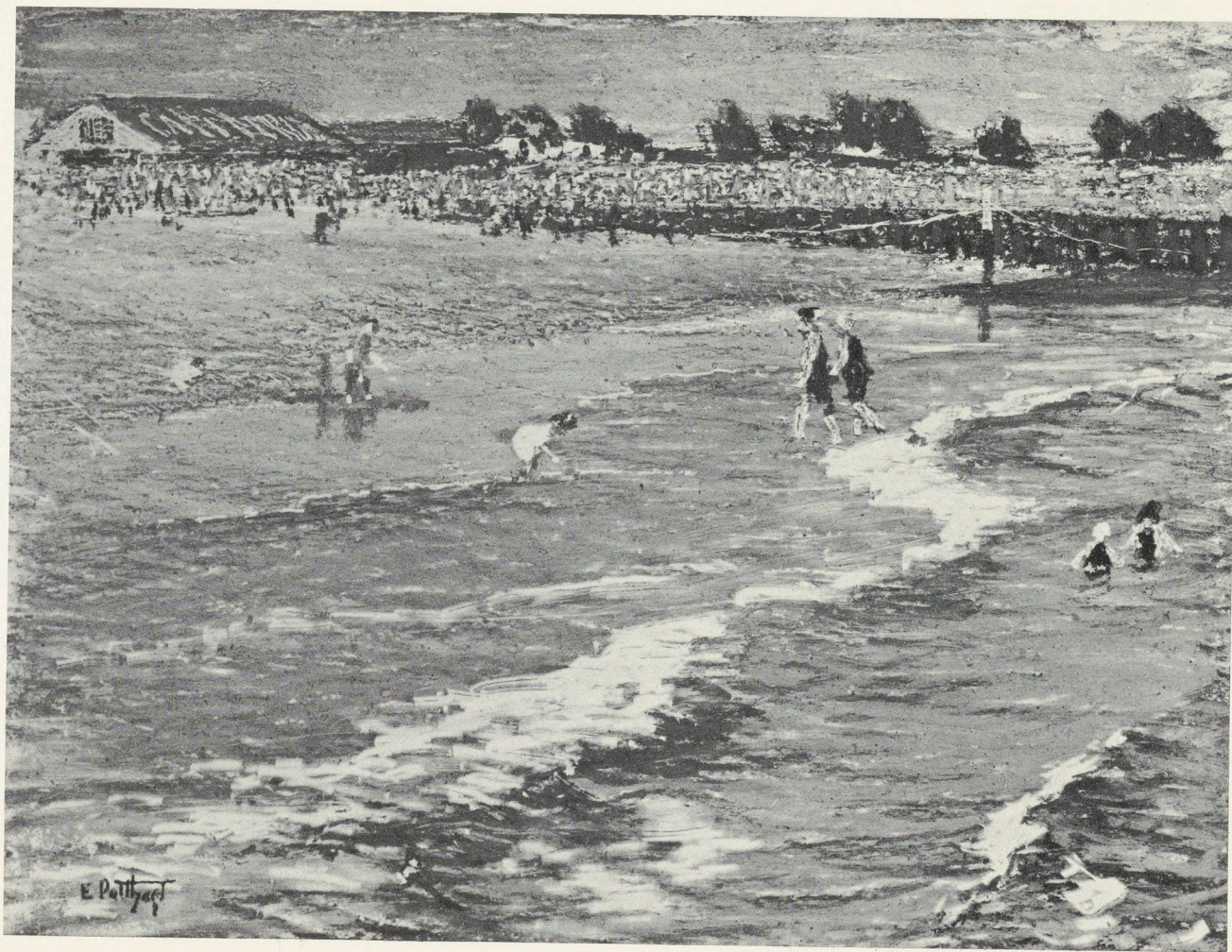
63. Manhattan Beach, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches



60. Shady Pool With Figure, on canvas, 24 x 20 inches



73. The Meeting, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches



46. Beach Scene, crayon on wax paper, 11 x 15 inches



24. In Central Park, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

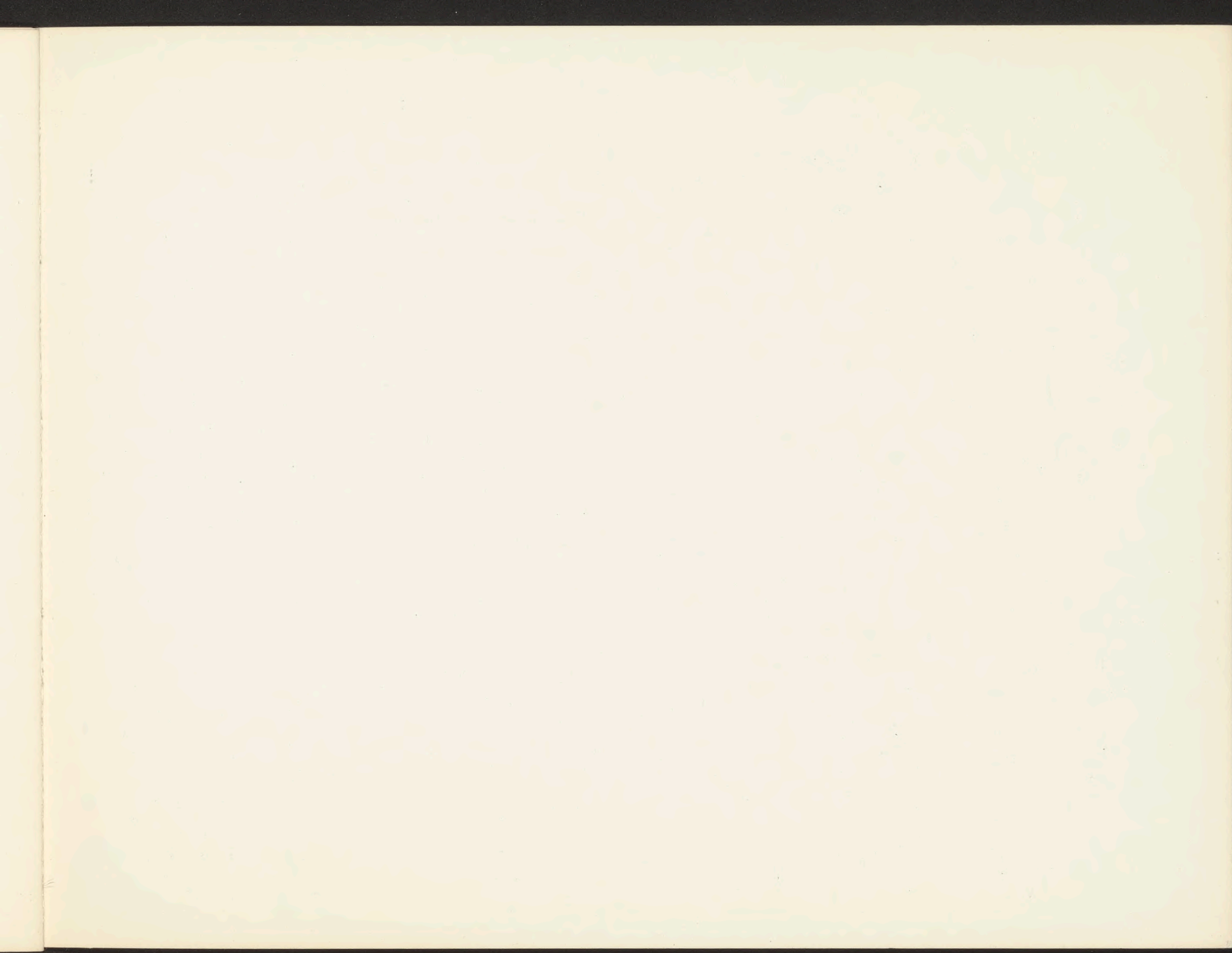
Catalogue

All paintings are in oil except as indicated. All are signed except number 77.

1. Evening Harbor, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
2. Starry Night, on canvas, 30 x 24 inches
3. Little Sea Bather, on wood, 12 x 16 inches
4. Canoeing, on board, 12 x 16 inches
5. Family Picnic, on board, 12 x 16 inches
6. Bathing in the Surf, on board, 12 x 16 inches
7. Shy of the Water, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
8. Green Umbrella, on board, 9 x 12 inches
9. Breezy Beach, on wood, 9 x 12 inches
10. Artist at Work, on wood, 9 x 12 inches
11. Mid Summer—Far Rockaway, on wood,
8 x 10 inches
12. The Conference, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
13. Bathers, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
14. Gloucester Docks, watercolor, 18 x 24 inches
15. Young Bathers, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
16. Baby Carriage on Beach, on board, 12 x 16 inches
17. An Old Dock, watercolor, 22 x 30 inches
18. Bathing Beach—Low Tide, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
19. Too Timid, on wood, 12 x 16 inches
20. Lake Louise, on board, 12 x 16 inches
21. Purple Evening, on board, 12 x 16 inches
22. Rocky Beach Scene, on board, 12 x 16 inches
23. The White Sails, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
24. In Central Park, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
25. Water Nymphs, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
26. In the Park, on board, 12 x 16 inches
27. On the Sands, on wood, 12 x 16 inches
28. Blue Skies, on wood, 12 x 16 inches
29. The Little Beach, on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
30. Sea Gulls, on wood, 12 x 16 inches
31. Chums, on board, 12 x 16 inches
32. Summer Breezes, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
33. Sailboats, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
34. Sailboats, on board, 12 x 16 inches
35. Beach Scene, on board, 12 x 16 inches
36. Central Park, on board, 12 x 16 inches
37. Boy Bathers and Sponson Sail, on board,
12 x 16 inches
38. A Summer Day, on board, 12 x 16 inches

39. At Coney Island No. 2, on canvas board,
12 x 16 inches
40. The Swimming Lesson, on board, 12 x 16 inches
41. In Central Park, on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
42. On Brighton Beach, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
43. Mid Summer, on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
44. The Harbor and Dock, on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
45. Night Scene, New York City, on canvas,
20 x 24 inches
46. Beach Scene, crayon on wax paper, 11 x 15 inches
47. In Central Park, crayon on wax paper,
11 x 15 inches
48. Park Skyline, crayon on wax paper, 11 x 15 inches
49. In Central Park-Cyclist, crayon on wax paper,
11 x 15 inches
50. The Grand Canyon, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
51. A Family Picnic, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
52. At the Seaside, on board, 30 x 40 inches
53. The Balloon Vendor, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
54. Mending the Nets, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
55. Rocks, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
56. Moonlight, on board, 12 x 16 inches

57. In the Glade, on board, 12 x 16 inches
58. Blond and Brunet, on canvas, 16 x 20 inches
59. Central Park, crayon on paper, 11 x 15 inches
60. Shady Pool With Figure, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
61. Children at Shore #3, on canvas, 20 x 16 inches
62. Beach Scene #4, on board, 12 x 16 inches
63. Manhattan Beach, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
64. Mother and Son, on board, 12 x 16 inches
65. Lavender Shack, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
66. The Picnic, on canvas, 12 x 16 inches
67. Late Summer, on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches
68. In the Park #18, on canvas board, 8 x 10 inches
69. The Bridle Path, on canvas board, 8 x 10 inches
70. The Camp Fire, on canvas board, 8 x 10 inches
71. In the Forest on board, 8 x 10 inches
72. The Ferry Landing, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
73. The Meeting, on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
74. The Bathers, on canvas, 20 x 24 inches
75. Fairies, on board, 12 x 16 inches
76. Bathers, on board, 12 x 16 inches
77. Beach Scenes (3), pastels, 4 x 6¹/₂ inches



On The Cover: No. 15. Young Bathers, on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

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